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# Politics as Social Work: A Qualitative Study of Emplaced Empathy and Risk Work by British Members of Parliament

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## Abstract

The constituency work of British Members of Parliament (MPs) has long been referred to in political circles as a form of social work. This article reports on a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with thirteen MPs. The aim of the research was to find out what characterises their constituency work to understand why it apparently bears comparison with social work. The article draws on the concepts of proximity and place from the mobilities paradigm to articulate the idea of 'politics *as* social work'. MPs in the study engaged in face-to-face emotional labour in which they formed and sustained empathic relationships with people and places to represent them. They practised judgement under uncertainty and risk work, and they were embedded in local organisational networks of risk and trust with local authorities and other agencies. The article argues that this analysis of politics as social work provides a deeper understanding of the politics *of* social work. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and its severe socio-economic impact, the importance for social work of the concept of emplaced empathy and the need for our reorientation to place is thrown into particularly sharp focus.

**Keywords:** emotions, empathy, mobilities, place, proximity, risk

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## Introduction

Politicians are important figures for the social work profession. First, and most obviously, Members of Parliament (MPs) create the legal frameworks and policies that directly determine what social workers do. In the UK context, the specific duties and responsibilities of a statutory social worker come into effect through Government legislation that is scrutinised and passed by Parliament. Politicians are also important for social work as figures who speak and act in the public domain, and who sometimes demonstrate 'knee-jerk reactions' to serious incidents (Munro, 2011, p. 124). Political reaction to tragic events such as the death of a vulnerable adult or child can have a long-lasting and profound impact (Warner, 2015).

As well as their national and public roles, MPs are actively engaged in local communities, particularly in representing their constituents by taking up grievances on their behalf with local authorities and other agencies, with government ministers and in Parliament (Searing, 1985). Through this casework, MPs create, 'a social relationship—a human bridge—over the chasm between faceless bureaucracy and us citizens' (Crewe, 2015, p. 105). Their role in bridging national and local geopolitical distance was the focus when MPs were described as 'superspreaders' in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: 'We've got 650 people who spend half the week spread across the country meeting their constituents and the other half rubbing up against one another in Westminster' (source quoted in Chorley and Smyth, 2020, p. 1). Most importantly, in the context of this article, the constituency work of the MP has been directly compared to social work by politicians and has even been described by them as a form of 'glorified social work' (Crewe, 2015, p. 86). The aim of the small-scale 'MP Study' reported in this article was to explore the nature of constituency work from the perspectives of the MPs to understand why it might be defined in these terms in political circles. The focus of this article is, therefore, what MPs say they do in their constituencies rather than what they think or say social work itself is.

Before going further, we need to consider how social work can be defined in the context of the article. Rode (2017) has argued that defining social work is a 'never-ending story' (p. 64) but that the myriad definitions of it as a profession and scientific discipline can be distilled into three broad domains: helping people affected by social problems; inducing social change to improve these problems and, thirdly, improving quality of life by alleviating oppression and 'improving one's every day' (p. 73). This broad definition readily encompasses social work as it is practised in a wide range of contexts and settings, including statutory, third sector and non-statutory sectors. Elements of this broad definition of social work are seen to be animated in the association that MPs make

with their constituency work, not least because 'helping people with social problems' and representing them as constituents are often mutually constitutive activities. However, findings from the interviews with MPs show that there are also more fine-grained and interesting observations to make about 'politics *as* social work' and four key themes are highlighted in this article.

First, MPs placed great emphasis on the need to empathise with the suffering of individual constituents through proximity to them in the task of political representation. Secondly, they stressed the need to establish and maintain an empathic connection with their constituency as a *place* to represent their constituents collectively. Sustaining these empathic connections entailed significant amounts of emotional labour. Thirdly, the MPs gave vivid accounts of risk work in their casework and encounters with constituents 'on the doorstep'. Fourthly, they highlighted their experience of being embedded in local multidisciplinary networks of risk and trust. Each of these four themes is explored in-depth in the 'Analysis' section of the article.

The aim of the article is to revitalise interest in the relationship between social work and politics in general and to open space for us to think more creatively about how these two domains connect. I argue that empathy, helping with practical problems, managing risk and 'speaking up for' people and places as humanitarian responses to suffering are central to the informal comparison that MPs make between their constituency work and social work. This is true even when empathy is political and stems from an instrumental political imperative to 'be seen to' empathise. I further argue that understanding the role of the constituency MP as embedded in local communities is important for local authorities, third sector organisations and other agencies. In the next section, I briefly outline the relevant background and theoretical ideas that have informed this article.

## Representation and the politics of proximity and place

The particular intersection between politics and social work examined in this article has not been explored empirically before and so this research represents a departure into new territory. Whilst there is a rich literature in Politics on the roles and activities of politicians, including MPs, the references made to similarities with social work are generally not explored in any depth. Those references that *do* exist beg tantalising questions about what is meant by 'social work' in this specific context. What exactly does it mean when an MP is described as being 'like a high-powered social worker', for example? (Quoted in Crewe, 2015, p. 86)

In his classic, in-depth study of formal and informal roles undertaken by British MPs, Searing (1985, 1994) maps out in detail the informal

role of the 'Constituency Member'. This role is amongst the oldest in the British democratic system. At its core is that MPs speak up for the individual and collective interests of their constituents 'by making representations' (Searing, 1994, p. 159). Searing identifies two subtypes of Constituency Member: Local Promoters, who advance the interests of the constituency as a whole, and Welfare Officers, who seek redress for grievances on behalf of individual constituents. It is this latter role that is identified explicitly with social work by the MPs in Searing's study: '[Welfare Officers] serve their constituents as social workers, which at best means helping people with genuine personal problems and at worst means dealing with gas metres, toilets, and drains' (p. 156). This ancient form of political representation enjoyed a significant revival following the founding of the Welfare State and it has expanded ever since. In an important sense, then, the supposed social work role of the MP and modern social work as a profession have their roots in the same post-war historical and cultural moment.

Tellingly, the MPs in Searing's research held attitudes towards their 'social work' role that were complex and contradictory. They saw the role as important, but they were also conscious that it was viewed negatively by others. It was viewed with derision, as tarnishing, or trivialising the image of the MP, to the extent that even those who practised it with most enthusiasm sought to distance themselves from it. Whilst representation by MPs has been identified with social work, social work has long been defined in part by forms of representation, specifically by virtue of its role in '"speaking for" the subject' (Philp, 1979, p. 104). Social workers should, 'advocate for the rights of marginalized, stigmatized, excluded, exploited and oppressed individuals and groups of persons' (International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2018, p. 4).

In her anthropological study of The House of Commons, Crewe (2015) also found that MPs identified their constituency work with social work. She found that this work was demanding and often emotionally intense, involving face-to-face interactions with people experiencing intense hardship and distress. The work entailed the use of skills and values that are often identified with social work. These included listening skills, treating people with unconditional positive regard and dignity and respecting confidentiality. Crewe tentatively suggested that there were gender differences in terms of the degree of discomfort experienced by MPs in dealing with their constituents' suffering, with men seemingly less at ease. There is no space here to unpack this in the detail it warrants. Suffice it to say that *if* the practice of political representation is identified with the forms of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) that Crewe suggests, then a closer look at these practices from a social work perspective—as proposed in this article—is a fascinating and potentially enlightening prospect. What the in-depth studies by Searing and Crewe each highlight is that being available in person to constituents remains

the bedrock of political representation by MPs and that this often entails close personal interaction. Turning to the theoretical insights that are employed in the article, the mobilities paradigm (after Ferguson, 2010) helpfully draws attention to the importance of this type of proximity and, specifically, to the importance of co-presence (Urry, 2002).

Co-presence—being together with others—has obtained a fresh and powerful poignancy at the time of writing, in the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Warner, 2020). Despite the proliferation of technologies that facilitate communication at a distance, face-to-face contact remains fundamentally important for human well-being, as we have seen when the possibilities for such contact are severely limited (Urry, 2002). Co-presence provides the basis for people to assess the attentiveness and sincerity of others, for example, through eye contact and body language. In the negotiation and formation of trust, co-presence can enable 'the unmediated telling of "troubles"' (Urry, 2002, p. 259). As Urry succinctly puts it: 'social life often appears to involve variously organised "tight social worlds", of rich, thick co-presence, where trust is an ongoing accomplishment' (Urry, 2002, p. 261). The growing sociological literature on face-to-face 'risk-work' as experienced by professionals in front line practice reflects the complexities and tensions in this arena (Brown and Gale, 2018). Risk work is where practitioners apply abstract knowledge about risk to their everyday, 'client-facing' interactions and social relations with individuals, which is where tensions relating to power and moral judgements often come to the fore (Brown and Gale, 2018).

Urry (2002) adds place to the idea of co-presence, stressing that 'face-the-place' is as important for a sense of co-presence as face-to-face. Face-the-place involves the visceral experience of 'physically walking or seeing or touching or hearing or smelling a place' (p. 261). Being there for oneself and experiencing a place directly is critical to knowing it. Furthermore, in Cresswell's terms, 'Places are locations with meaning' (2008, p. 134). The idea of place is central to the role of the MP, since they represent, first and foremost, a geographically bounded constituency. Even though social work practice also often happens within carefully bounded geographical locations, the concept of place has received limited attention in social work practice and research (Stanley *et al.*, 2016). There are interesting and relevant exceptions. Holland (2014), for example, in her study of child safeguarding in a local neighbourhood, advocated a return to 'patch-based' social work teams, which 'allow qualities of proximity, availability and approachability and for workers to "know" their community' (p. 398). Similarly, Hicks and Lewis (2019) draw attention to the social work role in an 'emplaced understanding of well-being and welfare' (p. 806). An emplaced understanding of community needs can perhaps be more readily identified with social work in third sector organisations and the non-statutory sector.

## The MP study

The aim of this qualitative research was to become familiar with the day-to-day activities, concerns and lived experience of MPs in their constituency work. In this sense, the research approach was phenomenological. The focus was on the meaning MPs gave to their work, and this is reflected in the generous use of respondents' own words in the four-themed findings sections in the following.

The research was approved by the Ethics Panel of the University of Kent. Prior to each interview, I provided all respondents with an information sheet about the research and obtained their written consent. Certain details in the accounts and data extracts provided in the following have been changed to protect the anonymity of the respondent and/or the identities of people they discussed. I have taken great care to ensure these changes have not affected the meaning of the accounts.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen MPs between March 2018 and April 2019, following a pilot interview in late 2017. The mean duration of interviews was sixty-nine minutes, the shortest in duration lasting forty-one minutes and the longest one lasting one hour 38 minutes. Many interviews were longer than I anticipated and in several cases, they ran overtime at the request of the MP. The interviews were digitally recorded and then professionally transcribed. In analysing the data, I drew on Coffey and Atkinson's (1996) work on 'concepts and coding'. Using NVivo, I coded different segments of the data into categories that related to a common topic or concept. I then retrieved these coded data using NVivo so that categories were easily pulled together and could be read. I printed out the categories so I could explore them, 'to make pathways through the data' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 46). In so doing, I remained, 'sensitive to the *storied* quality of many qualitative data' as counselled by Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 52). In identifying patterns, themes and irregularities in the data, I was able to make generalisations and theorise.

Recruiting to the research was a challenge. MPs are notoriously busy, but seldom more so than in 2019, when Brexit debates were at full throttle. I recruited some MPs through snowball sampling, but the bulk responded to a standard email that I sent to a selected range of individuals in order to achieve as diverse a sample as possible. I interviewed seven labour MPs (five women and two men); five conservatives (three men and two women) and one Plaid Cymru MP. Two had formerly been social workers. Three of the MPs represented constituencies in Wales, three in the North of England, one in the West Midlands, four in the Home Counties and two in London. I have indicated the sex (F and M) and Party (L, C and P) of each respondent in the data extracts quoted in the following to provide biographical context.

The sample of MPs was small and self-selecting, and this fact is likely to be reflected in the themes that emerged from the interviews with them. Having said that, whilst the sample is small, it is diverse in terms of sex, political party and geographical area. Furthermore, whilst self-selected, the MPs had diverse motivations for agreeing to be interviewed. For example, whilst several had a specific interest in the subject, one MP said they simply liked to help with any research whenever they could, and another said they just wanted relief from Brexit. The quotations used in the article were selected to reflect the patterns, themes and irregularities that I found in the coded categories of the data. In selecting these quotations, I also sought to ensure a balance between voices from across the sample of MPs—for example, between men and women, and across political parties.

The article now moves on to present four main themes that emerged in the analysis of the interview data.

## Analysis: four themes

### 'You make the small person big': empathy, power and emotional labour in representation

A recurring theme in all the interviews was the high value that the MPs placed on empathy and co-presence in representation. This MP observes the direct parallel between his role and social work in terms of his capacity for empathy: 'If you lose the will to empathise with people's sadness and misery and difficulties and whatever, then you're in the wrong job, and that's true of a social worker' (03MC).

MPs were aware that email or telephone contact was not always seen as sufficient by constituents, when 'somebody feels it's their right for you to sit and listen to them *[…]* quite often it's because somebody thinks that if they see you, you will be able to empathise with them more' (11FL). MPs frequently stressed the importance of being physically present and accessible in their constituencies, despite the heightened security concerns since the murder of Jo Cox MP outside her constituency surgery in 2016. Holding open surgeries in places like supermarkets and public libraries, arranging timed appointments, making home visits and knocking on doors were all, 'a chance for me to connect with constituents' (07MC). Surgeries were also seen as important symbolically, 'so that even if [constituents] never come to a surgery, they know they *could*' (07MC).

Given that MPs are often the last resort for people who are desperately in need, it was clear that casework involves a great deal of emotional labour. This takes its toll at a personal level, as this next comment graphically illustrated:

> sometimes you just go into your surgery and it's just like being punched; you know, one tragic story after another, you know, and you go home and you just sit there and just think for a while. (01ML)

For one MP the association with social work in negative terms was illustrated when his wife told him, 'You're a social worker' because he is, 'a bit soft' (10ML).

MPs who had experience as social workers or in similar helping professions commented on feeling able to create a buffer against the full emotional impact and, 'having a good grounding in being able to be more objective' (04FL). However, complete detachment was seen as being at odds with the core task of political representation: 'You can't do it and become completely cold because then people won't talk to you and they won't feel that you understand their issues' (04FL). The level of emotional engagement required in representing people had come as a shock for this MP, and he had consequently acquired new skills:

> I've had to learn to be a better listener. And just generally trying to make them feel more comfortable because some of the things are pretty awful they're coming to you with. (07MC)

Despite the stresses, MPs in the study generally considered constituency work to be more rewarding than their other role as 'legislator' because, 'Nobody's grateful that you've sat for hours and hours on the Mental Health Bill, but if you get somebody the hospital appointment they need, yeah, then they're very grateful' (12FL).

Whilst training and support were available for caseworkers, it was not generally available to MPs. There was mixed reaction from respondents to the idea that it should be, with one of the most experienced MPs commenting, 'you can't be taught casework really'. His reasoning was that training is, 'by the book. We don't work by the book. We work outside the book *[…]* We have to know what the book *is*' (03MC). This MP thereby saw his role as advocating for his constituents through detailed 'street-level' knowledge of bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), whilst resisting any bureaucratic constraints on his own discretion to act.

Mediating between the subjectively felt grievance of the individual constituent and the remote bureaucratic structures of the state was seen by all the MPs as a core part of their role. In the words of one: 'You make the small person big' (01ML). However, the value systems that underpinned this role were complex and contradictory. For example, conservative MPs invoked values of fairness, deservingness and justice in determining their discretionary judgements about when to act, but these values were sometimes clearly at odds with the policies of their own political party in government. One such MP who was active in representing disabled constituents at Tribunals, said: 'I used to think that people were swinging the lead with disability benefit *[…]* Actually, experience has taught me that, by and large, people try and make light of their

disabilities' (03MC). When I raised the issue of government policies on disability benefits, he suggested that his local casework gave him 'a distorted picture of what's really happening'. The MP managed the contradiction by empathising with his own constituents whilst not extending this empathy to faceless others in the same situation. To paraphrase him, people who 'swing the lead' are 'somewhere else' rather than 'here'.

The complexity of the value systems in operation was further illustrated by an MP who was open about his dislike for casework and surgeries, but who spoke forcefully of the need 'to be polite and respectful' (02MC), regardless of whether he actually felt sympathetic. He felt he needed to be patient with people who 'have got sort of long convoluted problems' because 'you can't say "right, bugger off"'…' (02MC). Crucially, this MP's respectful stance towards each constituent—annoying or otherwise—was mobilised by the overriding need for him to fulfil the task of representation. Respect for the citizen represented respect for Parliamentary democracy, on which, of course, the power and authority of all MPs entirely depend.

The MPs' views about the power they held were also complex and often contradictory. They all felt that the expectations of constituents were unrealistic, as if they 'could wave a magic wand'; a specific phrase which came up often. They spoke of misunderstandings, such as the belief amongst some constituents that they controlled the local Council. One respondent felt that she had no power at all, 'I just have headed notepaper' (11FL). However, despite claiming that they could not wave a magic wand, all respondents readily gave vivid examples of the effective use of their unique authority. They spoke of using power the 'bureaucratic way' when they pursued an issue with the relevant agency or Tribunal on behalf of the constituent. Or they could use the 'political route', when, as this MP stated: 'I can go nuclear, I can ask for an adjournment debate, I can name and shame in The House' (03MC). Most of the MPs mentioned collective, cross-party efforts to exert pressure on Ministers and the government over certain policies, such as cuts to welfare benefits under austerity. So, whilst MPs felt they had little power, they could potentially use what little they had to great effect.

## 'On the doorstep': empathy and place

Not only was empathy important for the MPs in representing individual constituents, it was also important to them in representing the constituency as a whole—as a location with meaning. MPs stressed the importance of being out and about in the constituency; moving through it, knocking on doors—including outside election time; meeting people and talking to them about their concerns. This MP stressed the importance

of the collective empathic connection she felt she had: 'I know that I'm doing what my constituents want me to because I met them and they've told me, because I feel it as well—the way they do—so actually it gives me power' (09FC). The local knowledge of MPs extended to a sensory and emotional connection to specific localities and being 'tuned-in' to neighbourhood-level concerns and what people's priorities might be. This included encountering poverty and neglect reminiscent of the sensory experiences described in Ferguson's (2010) ethnographic research on social work. For example, this MP describes the common experience she had of being invited into homes where there was a 'smell of neglect', which meant, 'a smell thereof damp from the walls. Of damp from clothes that had been dried in the house. Stale cigarette' (04FL). She also described visual signs, such as windows covered with sheets, homes without wallpaper or carpet and with unwashed dishes in the sink.

The intimate knowledge of homes, streets and neighbourhoods that MPs felt they accumulated overtime created, to their minds, a strong empathic bond with people and places, particularly if they lived in the constituency themselves. The idea that these elements become blended together in a uniquely visceral, and *emplaced* empathy is captured in this answer given by one respondent, when I asked how she would define her relationship with her constituency: 'Well I am it. So, I live here and, you know, live and breathe the kind of constituency so it makes it easier because I kind of know what people are going to be thinking because I'm thinking it too' (06FC).

The emplaced empathy that MPs narrate is, crucially, also something that they can translate directly into political speech or action. In the following example, the MP responds proactively to what she predicts will be collective anxiety amongst older people following a notorious murder in a local neighbourhood. She describes how 'we ran a list of the elderly people who live here and went and door-knocked them and just said *[…]* "There's nothing for you to worry about, but we just know everyone is going to be feeling a little bit, you know…"' (11FL). The MP's sensitivity was to the prevailing atmosphere—the place-based mood that she felt would circulate following the violent event.

When we consider the collective feelings that can emerge after the death of a child from abuse or neglect, we can see how an MP might feel aware of intense but unspoken feelings shared with constituents. The 'tuning in' by them to collective feelings has been defined as 'emotional interest representation' (Warner, 2018). The following is a poignant example:

> Q: 'Do you think people felt guilty?'
>
> MP: 'I'm sure that people would have felt guilty. I mean, I haven't had people come to me and say that, but, I mean, I feel it; I feel like why don't I know what's going on in every single house in my constituency?

> Why was I not aware? If people had any concerns about the safety of the child, how come I didn't know about it? And in actual fact it's not my role necessarily to know about it…' (04FL)

The significance of place is later reinforced by the same MP when she describes the shock amongst local people that a child had died in their small town rather than the 'big metropolis of London'. She spoke about the difficulty for politicians, 'to even acknowledge that actually we can't guarantee 100 per cent that all children will be safe every day from parents or families' (04FL). The challenge of being realistic about the risks inherent in child protection was succinctly captured by another MP here:

> I just think that killing a child is of such magnitude, that for some people to say what is the realistic response—that, 'we need to make sure less of this happens' - rather than, 'we've got to combat this altogether'; well, why do we want *less* of a really evil thing? We want *no* evil thing! (02MC)

This pinpoints the tension between the symbolic role of the politician, who has to sustain the fantasy of a good society that is absolutely safe for children, versus the harsh, unpalatable realities of relative risk that social workers are faced with. However, there was evidence in the interviews that MPs are themselves also undertaking 'risk work' in perhaps unexpected ways.

## Judgement under uncertainty: risk work in the constituency

Whilst denying they had power on the one hand, most of the MPs were at the same time conscious of the unique power and impetus that they could bring to a referral or a complaint to local agencies, particularly social services, with their powers to investigate. Sometimes, the decision to refer was clear-cut, for example, in this encounter in the MP's surgery:

> you could just tell absolutely everything from her body language that this girl was not happy, clearly all of the constant side-eyed looks at her mum […] she was frightened to speak up. She had; she had bruises on her arm and I just thought I can't let this go. (11FL)

I was struck by the risk work and emotional labour that was entailed for MPs in reaching some decisions and the complex processes of mediation and reflection they engaged in. Whilst they described mediating between constituents and agencies, MPs were also used as conduits or messengers for constituents to express anxieties about each other—their neighbours or relatives—when they were afraid of reporting concerns directly to services. One MP described his concern that using his influence to make a referral might divert the attention of hard-pressed services

away from another child in need, and so he always made careful enquiries first. However, he balanced this caution against an awareness of the possible tragic consequences if he failed to report a concern: 'Because if you don't, you could have been the last person to have had an opportunity to be the advocate for that *[. . .]* child' (01ML).

The MPs were conscious that there are 'two sides to every story' (05FL), and several of them gave examples of constituents who had given them a version of events about social workers that later transpired to be untrue, with one commenting: 'there are some people who are just absolutely in denial' (04FL). Another observed, 'It's very, very difficult to tell because people can be so two-faced. You know, they can be absolutely to your face wonderful, "how could anyone possibly remove children from this person or this couple?", but you just don't know' (07MC). MPs spoke of the difficulty in distinguishing spurious or vindictive reports.

Several MPs said that they were troubled by some of the behaviour they encountered first-hand, particularly that of parents. However, they were unsure about the correspondence this might have with the risk of actual harm to children, as exemplified here: 'I see parents all the time I think are appalling [. . .] but I don't know that they're not a happy family, I don't know that they're not thriving' (11FL). This next MP, in expressing similar concerns, referred to child protection being 'everybody's business', but then highlighted the dilemma she faced when she had observed a parent using 'very aggressive shouting and swearing'. She questioned whether her use of power in this situation would have been appropriate because, '. . .it might have been a one-off *[. . .]* If I report that issue, am I overstepping my mark, given that I'm the one knocking on somebody's door unwanted, uninvited?' (04FL).

Some MPs drew on ideological beliefs about the family, poverty and social class in their thinking about risk. Belief in the central importance of parental love as a protective factor, despite parenting that might be judged poor, came up in several of the interviews. This MP, for example, reflects on the fact that parenting is hard: 'it's not easy bringing up kids and that kids get dirty and houses can be a mess and that doesn't mean to say that the child isn't loved or looked after, it just means it's all a bit of a mess and chaotic' (08FL). She reflected on her reticence to make a referral when she felt concerned because, .it's that British thing that we're all a little bit reluctant to get involved, aren't we? Unless it's in front of us and really obvious'. When I asked if she thought a social worker might go into one home she had described and see the risks differently, she answered, '. . .I think if you're a social worker, you would have the nous, the ability to determine whether something is just a bit of a mess or whether there's a serious problem. I'm hoping that's the case' (08FL). However, the clarity that social work judgements might

apparently bring was viewed more critically by the MP quoted in the next extract:

> For me, the real issue, and I have taken this up and fought for one or two cases, is when you get a real working-class family who are rough. They really love the children or grandchildren *[. . .]* and you get social workers going in who have a very different approach, a different background, and will see this as a dangerous environment for the child. (07MC)

According to this view, social work judgements are based on flawed perceptions of risk, and these are enshrined in classed identities and culture. The idea that social workers cannot always empathise with the people they work with was echoed by another MP who—whilst sympathising over high caseloads—said that social workers had, 'Completely a lack of understanding that the person that's sitting in front of them doesn't really understand what's going on' (09FC).

## Embedded in networks of risk and trust: MPs as mediators with social services and other agencies

The study suggested that the MPs were part of the multidisciplinary environment, but they operated with very few formal protocols or procedures. Instead, they carved out unique and idiosyncratic ways of working with local agencies and authorities, largely through their relationships with senior figures such as Directors, Chief Executives and Council Leaders. These ways of working had often been shaped over many years and were based to varying degrees on trust or mistrust, and custom and practice. In one example, the relationships were well-honed and nuanced, with quite a formal etiquette. The MP had a 'code' in her written correspondence to local agencies, through which she was able to fulfil her obligations to represent her constituents whilst signalling to the agency when they should avoid wasting time on spurious investigations. On the other hand, however, she said, 'if I start [the letter] off by saying, "I'd be very grateful if you could review this case"; if I say that, it means I think you screwed up here' (11FL).

According to some MPs, they appeared to play a mediating role with agencies and third sector organisations in complex community dynamics that have a direct bearing on local social work practice. For example, in her work representing a large population from a particular minority ethnic group, to which she did not belong, this MP described how she mediated between women from this community and the local authority:

> When that population moved in there was no knowledge in [the local] Children's Services about [people from that cultural background]. . .if you had children who were being beaten with belts and sticks the

> Council would go, 'Oh it's cultural'. And so I've worked with some of the [women from that community] to advise the Council. (11FL)

Close, trusting working relationships between MPs and the agencies within their constituencies could facilitate a more nuanced response to serious events when they occurred, particularly when the media demanded a reaction from the MP. This was illustrated by one MP when he said that the local Council Leader or Chief Executive would telephone him to say, 'Look, we're just making you aware, there's a big pile of poo coming down the road next week about where we've screwed up' (10ML). In contrast, another MP spoke of a level of suspicion in social services towards her as an MP, which she described as a culture of 'don't tell them too much' (09FC). This type of comment highlighted the significant role played by the media in local networks of risk and trust in which MPs are embedded with agencies. MPs were aware of the cynical use of media platforms by some of their colleagues, with one, for example, observing that, 'there's a lot of MPs who just want to be on the front page, there's a lot of MPs who just want to be on the telly *[. . .]* they love their own media' (11FL). The view that MPs should ideally respond calmly to serious incidents in the media was a common theme in the interviews. As this MP put it, 'Politicians should always seek in my view stability and calm and not inflame things. That doesn't mean they then say, "don't need to do anything about it," but they should seek to draw the poison out of it' (07MC).

The article now turns to discuss the issues raised by these four themes and their relevance for our understanding of the relationship between politics and social work.

## Discussion

The article has outlined how the constituency work of MPs was characterised by four core elements involving emotional labour and risk work. When politicians describe constituency work as being 'like social work', it is to this array of activities that they apparently refer, and it is in these terms that I define 'politics *as* social work'.

MPs in the study engaged regularly in face-to-face, co-present encounters with people who faced severe hardship. They were often involved in trying to help people and improve their quality of life, including many constituents who had been designated as existing outside civil society. For MPs to claim that they were representing their constituent, the constituent had to believe that their MP had heard and understood their grievance. Even if an MP was sceptical about a constituent's deservingness, they claimed they had to modify their feelings to comply with the overriding need to afford that individual—notionally at least—the right

to respectful representation as a citizen. This 'political empathy' was a vital tool in the practise of representation.

Whilst empathy is considered central to the value base of social work, there is some evidence that—in the statutory sector at least—social workers may show a surprising lack of it (Lynch *et al.*, 2018). Gibson (2019) found that shame and humiliation rather than empathy can characterise the experience of service users in their contacts with statutory social workers. The conceptualisation of 'politics as social work' in this article suggests that we should consider the place of empathy in social work practice more critically and as being more firmly linked to rights-based practice.

MPs not only represented individual constituents they also embodied and spoke for entire communities and for their constituency as a *place*, a location with meaning. As outlined in the introduction to the article, this attachment to place does not generally resonate in social work practice or research, particularly not in the statutory sector. There have recently been appeals for improved practice with people living in poverty that stress the need to know and understand local communities, to involve them and to undertake advocacy-based practice (British Association of Social Workers, 2019). For an MP, knowledge of their 'patch' is a vital prerequisite for representing it. As Crewe has observed, their constituency work gives MPs, 'a sociopolitical, institutional and economic ethnography of the local welfare state' (p. 94). MPs guard their constituency's reputation as a place with intensely visceral and partisan loyalty, though not necessarily the agencies within it. I have suggested in the paper that the emotional energy in emplaced empathy may go some way to explaining the vociferous political reaction to the death of a local child that is sometimes seen in the UK context. It also tells us something important about social work's own relationship to place and the greater attention that we should give to it.

Through their surgeries, in their casework, and on the doorsteps of their constituents, MPs were actively engaged in risk work and in making judgements under uncertainty. They were embedded in the complex multidisciplinary networks of risk and trust that social workers also inhabit. MPs were regularly exposed to the complexities of relative judgements about risk and, to some extent, the fear of getting it wrong. Constituency MPs have one foot in the most powerful institution in the land, the House of Commons and the other, along with social workers and others, in 'The swampy lowlands, where situations are confusing messes incapable of technical solution and usually involve problems of greatest human concern' (Schön, 1983, p. 42). MPs operated in close proximity to social work, agencies, third sector organisations, and to service users and their communities, and largely outside public view. In certain respects, the constituency work of an MP might, therefore, like social work, be considered an 'invisible trade' (Pithouse, 1987, p. 2). Crucially, it is through the

imperatives of political representation that this trade is animated. Whilst recognising that co-operation may not always be practicable, senior managers and leaders should facilitate good working relationships with the local MP(s) where possible and where poor relationships exist, analyse and seek to remedy the underlying reasons for these.

In conclusion, the emotional labour of MPs in this study has suggested that partisan loyalty to *place* can be a crucial denominator of empathy for people. It is this 'emplaced' empathy that most powerfully characterises politics as social work. I argue that our professional capacity for empathy as social workers is indivisible from our willingness to speak out for and be identified with the people and places with whom we work. The tendency to see empathy purely as a communication skill obscures its importance as the framework on which social work's humanitarian value base and, crucially, its political voice may depend. As we have seen, empathy in constituency politics hinges on proximity; on knowing and understanding people within the local landscape, both physically and affectively. With the Covid-19 pandemic and the long-term socio-economic turmoil that goes with it, the need for social work's reorientation to place has never been more urgent than at the present time. The extreme human need that is now unfolding calls for all social workers, particularly statutory ones, to be relocated to become an integral part of their local communities rather than detached from them.

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